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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 002260

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/BCLTV. HQ USPACOM FOR FPA (HUSO)

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SUBJECT: THAILAND: AMBASSADOR'S MEETING WITH THE  
CHULARATCHAMONTRI

Classified By: Ambassador Ralph L. Boyce, Reason: 1.4 (d)

1. (U) SUMMARY: During the Ambassador's March 28 courtesy call on the leader of Thailand's official Islamic community, the Chularatchamontri stated his support for the National Reconciliation Commission (NRC) headed by former Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun. The 89-year-old Muslim cleric expressed his wish to visit the U.S. with members of his Central Islamic Committee in an effort to support and reach out to "moderate Islam." END SUMMARY

2. (U) Born Sawat Sumanyasak on January 27, 1916, the Chularatchamontri is the 15th Muslim cleric to assume his position, which dates back nearly 400 years to the Ayuddhya period. The Chularatchamontri (or Sheikul Islam in Arabic) is selected by the 45-member Central Islamic Committee and appointed for life. On March 28, the Ambassador and notetaker traveled one hour to the Office of the Chularatchamontri, which is located on a compound on the outskirts of eastern Bangkok, nearly surrounded by rice fields. The Muslim leader's 20-acre complex (on land donated by the Royal Crown Property Bureau) houses a large golden mosque, offices for a staff of 50 and a sports stadium.

3. (U) The leader of Thailand's six million Muslims received the Ambassador in a traditional Muslim turban and dressed in a long white garment with a black robe adorned with a single row of military-like rank insignia. He appeared lively and at ease and opened the meeting by expressing delight that the Ambassador had come to meet him. He noted that he was aware from reports on presentation of credentials to the King when new ambassadors arrived to Thailand, but few had come to visit him.

4. (C) While the Chularatchamontri needed some assistance to walk and to get up and down, his wit and intellect clearly are unaffected by his advanced years. After the Ambassador noted his various postings including his most recent experience in Indonesia, the Chularatchamontri commented he had traveled extensively, including most of Europe and even to Egypt, "which is better than Napoleon could manage." He then went on to tell a joke ending with a racy double entendre.

5. (SBU) The Chularatchamontri noted the support that the Muslim community has received over the years from the entire Thai Royal family. (Note: The Ambassador noted he was going to meet later that day with Princess Chulabhorn and the Chularatchamontri asked the Ambassador to send special warm regards to her. End note.) Expressing his desire to visit the U.S., the Chularatchamontri and the Director of his Office, Dr. Niran Pantharakit, suggested that a 10 member delegation from the Thai Central Islamic Committee would be interested in meeting with U.S. Muslim leaders. They are particularly interested in forging ties between Thai Muslim youth and U.S. Muslim youth groups.

6. (U) The Ambassador mentioned the visit of the Indonesian Muslim leader, Ahmed Hasyim Muzadi, Chairman of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), one of the world's largest Muslim organizations (Septel). They discussed the Ambassador's experiences in Indonesia and Embassy Jakarta's efforts to support moderate Muslim academics.

7. (SBU) The Ambassador expressed his concern over the increasing violence and social strife in the southern provinces of Narathiwat, Pattani and Yala. The Chularatchamontri commented, "We are taking the wrong medicine for the disease that ails us." He alluded to government efforts in the south as "medicine for a headache (e.g. aspirin), "while the patient is suffering from a stomach ache."

8. (C) On the issue of the newly formed National Reconciliation Commission (NRC), headed by former Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun (Septel), the Chularatchamontri expressed confidence in Anand but was noncommittal about how the NRC might move to alleviate the violence. (Note: In a later conversation with Poloff, Dr. Narin revealed that the Chularatchamontri had not been consulted directly about the composition of the NRC. No members of the Central Islamic Committee were chosen for the NRC. Dr. Narin had no

explanation for this apparent slight and queried Poloff about details on the NRC appointment process and possible membership. End Note.)

19. (SBU) The Chularatchmontri then said that some observers have cited language as one of the main causes of problems with Muslims in the South by pointing out that many southern Muslims don't speak the central Thai language used throughout the country and that most local officials (who are appointed by Bangkok) don't speak the local Malay dialect. But the Chularatchamontri rebutted this thesis, explaining that many different ethnic groups in Thailand don't speak central Thai as their native language, including Khmer speakers in the Northeast, Karen speakers in the North and Chinese speakers throughout the country. He also dismissed the notion by some that the cause of separatist uprising is based partly on the fact that Islam in Thailand is an "imported" religion. He noted that all the other major religions in Thailand -- Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity -- are "imports." He also asserted a strong local media bias against the Muslim community, citing the example of newscasters referring to separatists in the south as "Muslim bandits", when actually the south was well known for criminal activity by bandits of many races and religions, not just Muslims.

10. (C) Lastly, the Ambassador stated that he had no plans in the immediate future to visit the far South. The Muslim leader agreed that for the time being it was best not pursue an Ambassadorial visit and thus cause unnecessary concerns about U.S. involvement in the South.

11. (C) COMMENT: This initial encounter with the octogenarian leader of Thai Muslims proved congenial, though short on substance. We intend to explore the possibility of facilitating a visit by him and members of the Central Islamic Committee to the U.S. END COMMENT.

BOYCE